Rabelais' coarse humour was therapy for his patients

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The reputation of François Rabelais — the 16th century French satirist — rests upon his often vulgar fiction. His scientific and medical work remain as obscure as the details of his life. In the histories of medicine, only Cumston and Garrison contain Rabelais' name, and even they make few references and minimal mentions, and Singer's index does not list him. Yet, encyclopedias devote pages to him and we find the adjective Rabelaisian in many dictionaries. The large "Webster's New International Dictionary" defines Rabelaisian as "coarse, extravagant humour with a satirical purpose and an exuberance of imagination and language. . . .", and in the "Oxford Universal Dictionary", Rabelaisian writings are, "distinguished by exuberance of imagination and language, combined with extravagance and coarseness of humour and satire."

Confusion surrounds Rabelais' birthdate. The Oxford reference gives his lifespan as 1490–1553 while Collins' "Authors and Printers Dictionary" records it as 1483–1553. Both "The Dictionary of Scientific Biography" and "Everyman's Encyclopaedia" give 1494 as his birthdate, at Chinon, in Touraine. "Chambers Encyclopaedia" gives 1483 or maybe 1494 at La Devinière, near Chinon. "The Encyclopaedia Britannica" gives the wide range 1483–1490 or 1495, and at Chinon on the Vienne, Touraine, and finally, Wyndham Lewis, who has surveyed the ground, opts for 1495. Samuel Putnam's "Rabelais" suggests that Rabelais' birthdate may be February 1494, on the night of the 3rd or the morning of the 4th of that month, and in the little farmhouse of La Devinière, near Chinon. (There is a modern photograph of this farmhouse in Wyndham Lewis' book, "Doctor Rabelais".)

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Difficult to be brief

This uncertainty about an event known to have taken place in a defined locality illustrates the difficulty of writing a short historical sketch of this great man. His father, Antoine Rabelais has been described as an apothecary and innkeeper, and he may well have owned an inn, for he was a qualified lawyer and a property owner. The family apparently included three boys and a girl, François being the youngest son, but there are differing opinions about this too, in the above-named encyclopedias.

The infant of February was probably baptized in the Benedictine abbey church at Saint-Pierre de Seuilly, where he was tonsured when he was 7 (or 9) years old. He certainly became a novice either at Seuilly or with the Franciscans at La Baumette, and it is clear from his writings that he had a monastic training that led, eventually, to his entering the Franciscan monastery of Puy-Saint-Marten, at Fontenay-le-Comte in Bas Poitou, where he was ordained as a priest. His education is betrayed in his famous writings but it is also clear that he was exposed to the teachings of the great medieval schoolman and metaphysician Duns Scotus (1265-1308). Despite the laissez-faire philosophy in his literary creations, the only problem that Rabelais, himself, suffered in the monastery derived from his addiction to Greek literature — the favourite fare of the humanists. The Roman Catholic Church's break with the humanists took place in 1524, 3 years after Martin Luther burned the papal bull in Wittenberg.

There is evidence that in these early years Rabelais was a great and interesting talker, a person of charm, welcome at the tables of influential people and willing and able to discuss the problems of the new intellectual life. Part of his fame depends, of course, on his place as a thinker and writer in the new days of the Renaissance, with its possibilities for a better life and new freedoms for society. Certainly he managed to attract the eyes of some who were to be very useful to him in the years when his politics and theology were suspect and the Sorbonne could hear no good of him or his writings.

How Rabelais achieved all of this is not easy to trace; there are gaps in his biography where the clues are few and speculation may play too large a part. But he did

begin to write at a time when literature could be given wide distribution through the invention of printing. Copernicus' discovery of the width of the heavens and the discovery of the Americas were part of this new age that also stretched backward with the revival of classical learning. If Rabelais is remembered as a boisterous writer, famous now for his coarseness, he was then writing for his time in the language of his age.

His earliest work was, however, poor: the "Epistle of Bouchet", written in 1526 when he was 30 or so, was of a poor poet being answered by a writer of doggerel. Rabelais never wrote poetry of fine quality. For the next 4 years, until 1530, little is known of him. He may have been a wandering scholar or even a sedentary student in Paris. On Sept. 15, 1530 he was enrolled as a medical student at Montpellier. Perhaps some experience in the last years impelled the ambition to go into medicine; perhaps with a less than priestly eye, he beheld the misery of the time and the deadful condition of the poor. At any rate, though he still wore, or could wear, the clerical habit, his future was to be as François Rabelais, Doctor of Medicine.

It was, perhaps, not quite as simple as that, for it was another 7 years before he was graduated with that doctorate. As doctor and priest, he was inhibited by his priesthood from fully using his medical abilities: he could not use the scalpel or the cautery, or practise medicine for gain. His behaviour in all his capacities can perhaps be understood best from his medical perspective. He had profound satirical abilities yet to be shown. As a student in Montpellier he is known to have acted in a university farce on the-man-who-married-a-dumb-wife theme, and he may well have written it. As Putnam's "Rabelais" says: "He was to continue within the fold and was to die a country curate; but it was medicine that was to become the centering activity of his life, his literary work being regarded by him as a kind of therapeutic for his patients — the therapeutic of laughter."

Putnam's theory implies, of course, that Rablais' medical practice was among the upper, literate classes, able to afford the new printings being produced at that time with movable type at Lyons — the centre of the printing industry and where Rabelais was living. Rabelais may well have been forced to write by a need for money to conclude his medical studies, for it was in 1532 that he was writing and editing texts of Hippocrates and of the early Roman writer and physician, Galen, and revising the early "Medical Letters" of Giovanni Manardi of Ferrara (1462-1536). Manardi was one of the early believers that the study of medicine required the study of sick persons and not merely the repetition of phrases and ideas from medical books. Though he continued his Hippocratic studies for several years more, perhaps Manardi's beliefs also helped to turn Rabelais outward.

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In August 1532, a bestseller — "The Great and Inestimable Chronicles of the Great and Enormous Giant Gargantua" — appeared at the fair at Lyons. The book was an instant success, but it was not by Rabelais, as has been suggested.

The year 1532 was remarkable for its long, hot, dry summer when everything was parched; so it was fitting that at the November book fair, Rabelais' "Pantagruel" was published. Pantagruel was king of the thirsty ones (the Dipsodes), and the work, coarse and satirical, fell on a thirsty world. But it was signed Alcofribas Nasier, an anagram.

At the same time as "Pantagruel" went to press, though presumably not because of it, Dr. Rabelais was appointed physician at the Hotel Dieu, in Lyons, with a salary of 40 French pounds per year. He is said to have performed so well in this post that the hospital's death rate fell by 3%. Nonetheless, after a visit to his birthplace where he found his father disputing over river rights with his neighbour, his mind turned to the writing of "Gargantua" a work displaying rustic humour, and this now famous satire was published in the autumn of 1534. In the interval, the author wrote "The Pantagrueline Prognostication" and the first of his almanacs, "Almanac for the Year 1533".

In October 1533, the Sorbonne suppressed "Pantagruel" as being obscene and sacriligious. Rabelais had left his hospital post, after providing a substitute, and went to Rome with a patron, Jean du Bellay, Bishop of Paris. The stay was for only a few months but was sufficient to impress him with the riches of Italy and to cause him to lose his post at Lyons.

In 1534 his "Gargantual" was immediately attacked by the Sorbonne while Rabelais was busy producing an edition of Giovanni C. Marliani's "Tropographia Antiqua". In 1535, although he published an almanac and was back at the hospital in Lyons for a time, Rabelais again accompanied Bishop du Bellay on his journey to Rome to be made a cardinal. Acting as the bishop's physician, Rabelais took advantage of the opportunity to see Pope Paul III, who gave him absolution for abandoning his monk's robe and permitted him to enter any Benedictine monastery and continue practising as a cleric-physician. Despite these dispensations, in 1536, Rabelais became a canon of Saint-Maur-les-Fossés on the motion of the cardinal (because the Benedictine house had become secularized and Rabelais was no longer a monk). The salary was granted for life and the place was, according to Rabelais, a "paradise". He was not, however, compelled to stay at Saint-Maur-les-Fossés and by 1537 Rabelais was back in Lyons giving demonstrations in anatomy; then returning to Montpellier, he took his licence and, on May 22, his doctorate in medicine. He seems to have attracted attention almost at once by his wide

knowledge of botany and pharmacy, and by his cadaver dissections. He also lectured from Greek texts, especially from Hippocrates' "Prognostic". Toward the end of that year in Lyons, he earned lasting fame through Etienne Dolet's poem about his public dissection of a criminal.

His remarkable ability to be almost all things to all men is demonstrated by the fact that in July 1538 Rabelais was in the French monarch's train at the meeting of Francis, King of France, and Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain, at Aigues-Mortes, a meeting arranged by Pope Paul III. This meeting ended in favour of the Holy Roman Empire (and the Church of Rome); so Rabelais had to tone down the vulgarity in the third and fourth books of "Pantagruel".

The events of Rabelais' life from August 1538 to July 1540 are not known. It may be that in the earlier years he was teaching in Montpellier (as the "Dictionary of Scientific Biography" says) and it is alleged that in 1540 he became the father of a son who died in infancy. In 1540 he is known to have been back in Italy, this time in Turin with Guillaume du Bellay, brother of the cardinal, and he seems to have remained in this service, presumably as physician, until Guillaume's death in 1543. Then for 2 years he disappears from historical records, perhaps because in a change of fortune, he was without a literary protector — a situation that changed in 1545 when he was given a royal privilege for the printing of his works. When his third book appeared it bore the author's name as "M. François Rabelais, Doctor of Medicine". Incidentally, this work remains the most topical and the wisest of the Pantagruel series, with little or no giantism and the role of women as its main theme. Even with his royal privilege, Rabelais saw this work banned around April 1546 and, in general, his life begin to go awry; so he left France for Metz where he is said to have lived in the Jewish Quarter and to have written the fourth book. He is also said to have been a town physician.

In April 1547 Rabelais made his third stay in Rome, with Cardinal Jean du Bellay. While writing part of the fourth book there, he also published his "Almanac for the Year 1548" and when, on Feb. 3, 1549 a second son was born to Henry II and Catherine de Medici, he wrote an account of the celebrations for the powerful Cardinal de Guise. It is known as the "Sciomachia" (Shadow-battle) and is extant.

Once again there is a gap in his life story. The time was filled with writing no doubt, but there was also an attack on him by several persons at court and the son of his father's old enemy, whose rustic battles had inspired some of Rabelais' writings. Yet du Bellay was his friend and in a move destined perhaps to give the ex-monk a comfortable niche in the Church, the ageing author was given a curacy at St. Martin-de-Meudon, in Paris, and at St. Cristophe de Jambet in Le Mans. However, the reconciliations that were being made between the courts of France and the Holy See under Pope Julius II made some of the views expressed in the fourth book unwelcome and a report was even spread in Lyons that Rabelais had been sent to prison. It is not certain that he ever took up either of the curacy posts though Samuel Putnam records the legend that in his old age (he was not yet 60), Rabelais was teaching children the traditional medieval church music — the plainsong.

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He had resigned from both curacies by Jan. 9, 1553 and was then given (though he may have had it earlier) the honorary post of Maître des Requêtes at court. By this time illness was creeping upon him, or perhaps, as Wyndham Lewis suggests, the hounds of gout and cirrhosis had caught up with him. There is no record of his illnesses, and his death-bed saying ("Draw the curtain, the farce is over") is without any historical foundation. Even the date of his death, though now generally accepted to be Apr. 9, 1553, is not certain though it seems he was not alive in May 1554. Somewhere between these dates he died, in the Rue des Jardins, near the Bastile — in those days not a very good address. He is said to have been buried in St. Paul's Cemetery "at the foot of a tree". The tree and the cemetery are now gone and his ashes are reputed to be beneath No. 2 in the street.

His name lives forever in the adjective Rabelaisian, and in the medical term, Rabelaisin — a glycoside from Lophopetalum toxicum. His major works are renowned for their coarse humour and satire. Their size and the mere fact that they have survived are two testimonies to his labour in an unsettled life.

As a public physician, he practised only between 1530 and 1539. The "Dictionary of Scientific Biography" stresses that he was not just an expounder of ancient texts, but was interested in his patients and also in their diet. His writings brought much of the ancient science before the people of France. The famous anatomist and surgeon Ambroise Paré wrote in the 16th century that Rabelais described, after Galen, a glottocomion for treating thigh fractures by continuous extension and a syringotome with a concealed blade for incising strangulated hernias. Otherwise, Rabelais derived much of the science and natural history in this fourth book from his knowledge of old texts and not from personal observation.

Medical historians have little to say of or for François Rabelais; but, as the distinguished British scientist, J.D. Bernal, wrote in his "Science in History", Rabelais' famous statement, "Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme", though intended for the venal humanists of his time, has a message for today. ■